DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 211 247 RC 013 051

AUTHOR Dertien, James
TITLE Eastern Nebraska's Country Schools. Country School Legacy: Humanities on the Frontier.
INSTITUTION Mountain Plains Library Association, Silt, Colo. Country School Legacy Project.
SPONS AGENCY National Endowment for the Humanities (NFAH), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Jan 81
NOTE 60p.; For related documents, see RC 013 047-058 and RC 013 070-084.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Acculturation; Community Centers; Community Schools; Cultural Background; Cultural Education; Curriculum; Educational Change; *Educational History; Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethnic Groups; *One Teacher Schools; Oral History; *Rural Education; Rural Environment; *Rural Schools; School Buildings; School Community Relationship; *Small Schools; State History; Teacher Background; Teacher Role
IDENTIFIERS *Country School Legacy Project; Historic Sites; *Nebraska

ABSTRACT

The role of the rural school on the plains of eastern Nebraska from the early days of the frontier to 1980 is examined in this portion of an eight-state research effort, the Country School Legacy Project, sponsored by the Mountain Plains Library Association to locate and preserve information related to country schools. Data and anecdotes obtained through interviews, school records, published accounts, and visits to abandoned and existing school sites are presented under six chapter headings: Nebraska country schools as historic sites; Nebraska country schools as community centers; teachers; the 3 Rs (curriculum); early ethnic education (the role of the school in the Americanization process); and Nebraska country schools today. The first school in Nebraska is identified as a log structure built outside the walls of Fort Atkinson in 1822. For over a century Nebraska's schools have provided rural neighborhoods with a sense of community because they were the one place where all could gather for meetings, school programs, and social occasions. According to the feelings of one person interviewed, the present administrative policy of reorganizing country schools with city schools, rather than consolidating them into larger, but still rural, schools is responsible for the diminished role of the country school today. (NEC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED211247

COUNTRY SCHOOL LEGACY:

Humanities on the Frontier

EASTERN NEBRASKA'S COUNTRY SCHOOLS

James Dertien

Bellevue Public Library
Bellevue, Nebraska

January 1981

Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities

Sponsored by the Mountain Plains Library Association

RC 013051

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

✓ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Andrew Gulliford

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

COUNTRY SCHOOL LEGACY ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

Project Director:
Andrew Gulliford
Colorado Mountain College/Silt Elementary School
Silt, Colorado

Media Director:
Randall Teeuwen
Photo America
Fort Collins, Colorado

Exhibits Director:
Berkeley Lobanov
Denver, Colorado

Fiscal Agent:
Joseph Edelen
I. D. Weeks Library
University of South Dakota
Vermillion, South Dakota

COUNTRY SCHOOL LEGACY: HUMANITIES ON THE FRONTIER

The Mountain Plains Library Association is pleased to be involved in this project documenting the country school experience. Funding of this project from the National Endowment for the Humanities, cost sharing and other contributions enabled us all to work with the several state-based Humanities Committees as well as many other state and local libraries, agencies and interested citizens. We are deeply impressed not only by the enthusiasm for this work by all concerned but by the wealth of experience brought to bear in focusing attention on—and recapturing—this important part of history, and how we got here. This project seems to identify many of the roots and "character formation" of our social, political and economic institutions in the West.

Already the main Project objective seems to be met, stimulating library usage and increasing circulation of historical and humanities materials in this region. Public interest is rising in regional, state and local history. Oral history programs are increasing with greater public participation. The study of genealogy—and the search for this information—is causing much interest in consulting—and preserving—historical materials. What has been started here will not end with this project. The immediate results will tour the entire region and be available for any who wish the program, film, and exhibit. There will be more discussion of—and action on—the issues involving the humanities and public policies, past and present. The Mountain Plains Library Association is proud to be a partner in this work, the Country School Legacy, and its contribution to understanding humanities on the frontier.

Joseph J. Anderson
Nevada State Librarian
Past President
Mountain Plains Library Association

DEC 1981
ERIC/CRESS
RECEIVED

DEC 1981
ERIC/CRESS
RECEIVED

Nebraska
COUNTRY SCHOOLS AS
HISTORIC SITES

Prepared by
James Dertien, 1/81

Constant reminders of Nebraska's rich country school heritage dot the countryside of this state, whether it be a frame or brick school building still in use, one preserved by a proud rancher, a building still practical for farm equipment storage, or one of many in use as homes.

Washington County presents a representative example of typical rural school building usage. Twenty-eight former schools have either burned or been torn down, four are still in use as schools, fourteen have been converted to homes, one is being used as a church, two have been preserved (one privately, one as a state historic site), one serves as a community hall, the upstairs rented to a pre-school, and two serve as farm storage buildings.

In other counties surveyed this pattern repeats itself again and again. In recent years the buildings have become especially popular for conversion into homes. A few of the schools presented luxurious opportunities using high quality wood panels, small-paned windows and brick walls to the new occupants while others demanded considerable structural improvement to make them habitable.

Frequently encountered were stories about local farmers who, in the face of the inevitable closing of a school, purchased the building, continuing to maintain it privately

for use as a community meeting hall or simply for the satisfaction of future generations. In these instances it is likely that the new owner had himself once attended this school along with his parents and probably his grandparents.

The buildings that are still standing are rarely the original structure in the District. In many instances they are the second or third building or show evidence of several additions as the school population required larger quarters.

As noted by Alton Larsen[1] of Blair it was not always important to have a building to begin a school. Classes were usually not very large, as the really early settlers were mostly bachelors or just husbands and wives, with large families to follow later. Education came first, then the buildings. Homes, barns and other places were used first.

Then, when class size and the need to centralize a location required it, an early primitive structure would be built.

Because the settlers themselves were usually living in a dug-out or a sod home, these were many times the same structure used by the school. On July 3, 1872, Mr. Bisbie, the first county superintendent in Washington County visited District No. 39 and reported, "School in a cave, rude, rough, but comfortable, furniture homemade and very temporary."[2]

1 Interview, Alton Larsen, Blair, NE, December 13, 1980.
2 Mr. Bisbie's book, Washington County Superintendent's Office, Blair, NE.

Bisbie on January 4, 1872 noted again in regard to the Sutherland school, District #20 that it was in a "cave, not very comfortable, temporary furniture." In May, District #44 was in the midst of a dispute regarding the location of their first school, and Bisbie reported that the Board "has failed to locate, I have therefore located site near center of district." He obviously exercised some authority in such situations.

"Think of the satisfaction of patrons in knowing that they had a school house, however crude, all their own!" noted Myrtle Johnson recollecting her student years.[3] In reading the various histories, listening to interviews and reviewing letters and other documents one rarely comes across any real complaints about conditions. They obviously appreciated what little they had.

In Pioneer Stories of Custer County, Nebraska, teacher B.C. Jones tells about a 14 by 28 foot dug-out which was her first classroom. Corn was burned as a fuel, with the supply piled on the edge of the schoolhouse roof. And occasionally classes were disturbed by "the hogs that ran wild and got on the roof and into our corn."[4]

In his book The Sod-House Frontier 1854-1890, Everett Dick notes that the "first temple of learning in Alliance, Nebraska, was a tent."[5]

---

3 (Unpublished) "History of District #58" (Madison County), by Myrtle Johnson.

4 Jones, B.C. "My First Term in a Dugout Schoolhouse", Pioneer Stories of Custer County, Nebraska. P. 163.

5 Dick, Everett. The Sod-House Frontier, 1854-1890. P. 319.

Next to dug-outs the sod structure was the next most likely to be found. Built much the same as sod houses they usually presented comparable degrees of discomfort.

> December first saw the new sod schoolhouse ready for its fifteen-year-old teacher in short skirts and long braids. The little unpainted, rickety table and equally feeble chair had been salvaged from the unoccupied sod cabin of my grandmother, Mrs. Martha Mapes; the square, wood-burning stove had been lent by Reverend William Elliot, father of W.C. Elliot of Mason City; six wooden benches had been made to accomodate not only the six pupils but the people who would come there to attend church services or community affairs. At the training school we had been taught how to make a crude blackboard by applying a compound--chiefly of soot or lampblack--to a kind of building paper. When six feet of this had been put in place and a box of chalk purchased, the equipment was complete.
>
> The home-made benches varied, as three had backs while three had none and the only boy, Ed Cooper, contended that he should occupy one of the most comfortable ones, so a compromise was necessary. As there were no desks, the writing lesson was a protracted one, each child in turn sitting on the teacher's chair at her table to laboriously write in his copybook.
>
> The floor was dirt and during the cold winter of 1884 the teacher's feet were frosted. Later a quantity of straw was put on the floor which made it warmer but proved to be a breeding place for fleas. This was not conducive to quiet study but did afford the children some bodily activity.[6]

The only expense involved in the construction of a sod school would be for rafters, window glass, a cast-iron stove and perhaps some paint for the blackboard.

While they were warm in winter and cool in the summer these sod structures did on occasion leak. Heavy rains often forced kids up on benches to stay out of accumulating water on the dirt floor which had leaked through the roof.

---

6 Welsch, Roger L. Sod Walls: The Story of the Nebraska Sod House, pp. 162-163.

hard, continuous rains began to dampen sod walls and would eventually leak through to the interior.

In wooded areas along the Missouri, the Platte and other streams, log cabins would usually be built for the students. Mrs. George Haight of Madison County describes the log school she attended, which was constructed about 1871:

> Mr. Hutchins hauled logs from the Elkhorn River, he then hewed off both sides, put them on top the other and filled the openings with grass and mud. For the roof he put on poles, trash and grass and lastly dirt. There was one window and a door large enough for a barn.
>
> The first year we had no floor, but the second they sawed slabs and placed them round side down. Benches were made of slabs also with four sticks driven in for legs and unless we sat just so, down all would go which often happened as we youngsters of this rudely constructed hut were in for a good time occasionally . . . .[7]

If green wood were used small branches would continue to sprout from the walls.

The very first schoolhouse in Nebraska was built in 1822 just outside the walls of Ft. Atkinson, on the Missouri north of Omaha. The Indians was sufficiently friendly to make possible the use of this small log building.[8] Later, in 1836, missionary Moses Merrill was able to construct a log home and adjacent schoolhouse six miles west of the mouth of the Platte river. Two years prior to this, in 1834, he had been running a temporary school in Otoe chief Itan's lodge.[9]

---

7 (Unpublished) "Deer Creek School of Early Days" (Madison County), by Mrs. George Haight.

8 Siampos, Helen. "Early Education in Nebraska." Nebraska History, Vol. 29, June, 1948, p. 113.

9 Beggs, Walter Kenton. Frontier Education in Nebraska: A Thesis . . . University of Nebraska, 1939. Pp. 19-23.

The process of locating a school often required a careful placement according to property lines. Lacking access to survey tools, "William Sharp who by the aid of a pair of harness lines and a pocket compass surveyed the land and outlined the various claims. . . . the surveyor's crude work stood the test of better surveying."[10] Though this was done near Norfolk, it is likely that the task was repeated elsewhere.

The minute books of school boards in every county are filled with exact notes on the motions, costs and other details related to building what one student referred to as frame buildings, "lighted and ventilated, especially ventilated . . ."[11]

County superintendent (Madison County) Arthur Bickley read this at the dedication of a new building for District No. 30:

> In order to make it possible for this district to receive its state apportionment, Mr. Touten gave one room of his house for school purposes.
>
> In 1887 bonds for $353 were voted for a new school building. The building was plastered and sealed and all help was donated that was possible.
>
> The Superintendent described the school building as being a new, frame building, well-lighted, no cupboards for books, and maps, but there were hooks for hats and caps. There were patent desks, no recitation seats, a teacher's desk, two square yards of blackboard surface.[12]

One school was built with a sod foundation, later replaced by brick. A student, Melodie Werner, in writing

---

10 Clipping dated February 1928, "Norfolk had the First School in Madison County -- Say Pioneers".

11 Note drawn from WPA report in Madison County Historical Society about District #43, 1883.

12 Bickley, Arthur. [History of District #30, Madison County, read at dedication of new building.]

about the school noted that the teacher would sometimes draw on the sod foundation to explain geography pictures.[13]

One sod edifice of learning in Madison County was replaced by a frame structure which the builders painted red. It was replaced by a larger building early in 1923, which continued as the "little red schoolhouse" in loyalty to the old one, with a fresh coat of red paint and white trim. This building is no longer standing.[14]

Most early desk and other furnishings were made by local carpenters. George Muffly, in the 1880's, helped one district replace its wall bench by building desks similar to the double desks manufactured later. He also built the first teacher's desk which was still in use in 1894.[15]

The schools were usually fairly close to each other, but from 1910 to 1930 they were regularly crowded in spite of their numbers. This was so because of large families and large numbers of families. Particularly in the eastern end of the state many families farmed only 80 acres, so there were many farms associated with each school. So many of the first frame structures were either replaced by still larger buildings or were added to. In about 1917 District No. 79 in Madison County had two school houses, "Charlotte Hayden taught the lower grades and Rose Hayden

---

14 WPA Report, Madison County Historical Society, "Little Red Schoolhouse", 11-22-39.

15 Sue, Nickie (student essay) "History of District 27" (Madison County), n.d.

13 Werner, Melodie (student essay) "The History of District 27, Madison County"

taught the High School (grades 9 & 10)."[16] "A new two-room schoolhouse was completed in 1917 (Union Valley)--one room to be used for hot lunches. This room was outfitted with dishes and a stove."[17] And another school, District No. 6, in Madison County also served hot lunches at about this time, usually soup and bread.[18]

In Brownville an ambitious plan was underway in 1857 to establish a medical college. Big plans were made with the building of a very attractive brick building to serve both the college and the church. A college president was hired, but all collapsed when Congress failed to recognize a petition for a land grant to support the school. The new building was then converted to public school use, with one resident building a"commodious private boarding house" nearby in anticipation of furnishing accomodations to out-of-town students.[19]

Large, square two-room schools can be found in Washington County. There are several and they were obviously constructed in this way to accomodate the large enrollments. In spite of size the schools somehow always found space to hold two to three times their normal attendance for meetings or

16 (no author or date, ca.1917) "Essay of Dist. 79 Madison County"

17 Dieter, Richard W. "History of Union Valley School #6" (Madison County)

18 Interview with Agnes Wehenkel, Madison, Nebraska, 10/17/80.

19 Beggs, Walter Kenton. Frontier Education in Nebraska: A Thesis . . . University of Nebraska, 1939. Pp 116-119.

Christmas programs.

Other structures found on school grounds included outhouses with well-worn paths leading to them, coal bins or other storage buildings for wood or corn fuels, small barns for horses, an occasional windmill and storm cellars.

The Orem school and a few others in Washington County had pipe fences around the property. Old well pipes were fitted into upright wooden posts, providing a safer fence than barbed wire, a place to tie-up horses, protection from passing cattle herds, and with a lower pipe removed a place for children to swing from and play.[20]

These schools usually made no provision for lights, so when meetings were held by adults in the evening, kerosene lamps were usually brought to the meeting. Some schools did have oil lamps. "One evening, Dec. 1947, Wilson Flood was on his way to Art Wobig's and saw a brightness in the school house so he turned around and went to Walt Erickson's. Together they went to the school house found the stove door open. Coal had fallen on the floor and was smoldering. Most of the light they had seen was from the open stove door."[21]

Small explosions were common from the old coal stoves. Alton Larsen indicated during a tour of the Orem schoolhouse that the subflooring showed evidence that the stove had at

---

20 Interview with Alton Larsen, Blair, NE, 12/13/80.

21 Thies, Douglas (student essay) "History of District 54" (Madison County)

once burned through with no other damage to the building.

Wood, corn (when the market allowed), cow chips and later coal were all used as fuel. Today, conservation-minded persons are beginning to renew an interest in corn as a fuel. It was and is a very good fuel. Everett Dick gives us background on cow chips:

> Horace Davis, who taught at Fish Creek in 1891 as an eighteen-year-old pedagogue, accepted a contract which as part of his duties required him to gather cow chips for fuel. Consequently at the close of the school day he went out onto the prairies, sack in hand, and picked up cow chips for the school stove. Since school teachers were an ingenious tribe, it may be safely assumed that they worked out some sort of game such as "I spy" or competition between teams for the honor of picking up the most chips to offer the pupils the opportunity of sharing the joy of bringing in the fuel.[22]

Those schools that are still open offer a structure today that differs very little from those constructed in the 1920's. Here is a typical description:

> This building is 28 feet square, with a 6 by 8 foot entry, with a full size basement. It faces east, and has windows on the south and west sides, to the back and left of the pupils. The blackboards are on the north side of the school room. The new desk chairs are used. There are two large cupboards at the east of the room for books and supplies. There is a roomy entrance for wraps with exterior door and also a grade door. The storm cave may be entered from the basement or outside. The building is furnace heated. The furnishings are teacher's desk and chair, recitation seats, blackboards, piano, pupil's adjustable chair desks, maps, reference books, hooks for wraps, a stone water fountain, and the school had a large bell.[23]

---

22 Dick, Everett. Conquering the Great American Desert. Nebraska State Historical Society, 1975. P. 68.

23 Leu, Caroline (student essay) "History of School District No. 30, Madison County, Nebraska"

DEC 1981
ERIC/CRESS
RECEIVED

Nebraska
COUNTRY SCHOOLS AS
COMMUNITY CENTERS

Prepared by
James Dertien, 1/81

Since before the turn of the century, for over one hundred years country schools have provided rural neighborhoods with a sense of community. First, there was the pride of having built their own school, and then as necessity demanded, it became the only place where all could gather for meetings, for school programs, and for adult education activities.

Madison County Superintendent Douglas Jensen observes that today's country school in his county serves an especially valuable community center purpose. Several of the county's schools serve Norfolk families who have chosen to live in rural neighborhoods. The families are young and active and turn out in great numbers for any school event. They participate eagerly in events to support the school, with a strong parent-teacher organization. In essence, they are displaying the same pride that has been the mainstay of these rural schools since the 1870's when the small frame buildings were filled to capacity for programs.[1]

Mr. Jensen also noted that recently one of his schools closed because of the need to merge with another. A local farmer bought the property and building solely for the purpose of using it continuously as a community center.

---

1 Interview with Douglas Jensen, Madison, 10/3/80.

Bess Street Aldrich writes in A Lantern In Her Hand about a very typical community activity using a school:

> That winter of '76 and '77 was another one of great hardship, but like many things in life, it had its pleasant side. A reading circle was formed and met at Woodpecker School every Friday night. Its members wore ribbon badges upon which Sarah Lutz and Abbie had printed the mysterious letters "S.C.L.R.C.," which, when the mystery was eliminated, were discovered to stand for the title of Stove Creek Precinct Literary Reading Circle. The membership was divided, like all Gaul, into three parts, and if there were not Belgians, Helvetians and Germans who fought and bled, at least, the "Reds," the "Blues," and the "Yellows" met in forensic frays. On one Friday night the "Reds" performed, the next two Fridays the "Blues" and "Yellows" respectively, and on the fourth Friday night a big contest was staged, in which the star members of the various colors mingled in one grand rainbow spectrum, with people imported from outside the precinct sitting in judgment upon the efforts. That winter the schooner *Hesperus* was wrecked, little Paul Dombey died, Hamlet met his father's ghost and the Raven quothed more times than there were meetings . . .
>
> Whole families came, ensconced on straw in the bottom of wagon-boxes which had been put upon bob-sleds. Every one brought heated soap-stones or hot flat-irons, as more than one load came from twenty miles away. The Henry Lutzses brought their reed-organ in the sleigh each time, so there was always music. Abbie was put on for a group of songs whenever the "Blues" performed, and always led the chorus singing. "Three Blind Mice" and "Scotland's Burning" were the favorite rounds. As for the favorite choruses, while great partiality was shown toward "Juanita," "Annie Laurie" and "Revive Us Again," for sheer volume there was nothing like "Pull For the Shore" to open the throttle. Young blades who could not carry a tune were filled with an irresistible impulse to sing whenever the life-line was brought out, and when the sailors began to make more rapid progress toward the lighthouse, they grab oars, as it were, open their mouths and bellow like young steers.[2]

---

2 Aldrich, Bess Streeter. Lantern In Her Hand, D. Appleton & Company, 1931. Pp. 127-128.

Her description sounds pretty glamorous, yet that is probably the way most of the participants would prefer to remember it. With the pot-bellied stove fired and the oil lamps lit the schools were often the location for such a literary meeting, a spelling bee, a box social, a debate, a meeting of a farmer's organization or as a temporary home for a church.

A Mrs. Huddle in a history of District No. 17 in Madison County writes that several early pupils "mentioned the debates and entertainments, they had. In the debates the patrons of the school took part. Many were the good times, they had."[3]

And community activities were not limited to just the building, as Mrs. George Haight observes, "Then again all would dance the Virginia Reel or the old square dances to the tune of a mouth harp or violin fashioned from a cigar box, on the bridge within site of the teacher at her desk. In the winters they would tobaggon down its banks and across the old skating pond . . ."[4]

An early teacher, Nellie Brown recalls that, "Sometimes at the close of the year, we had the parents bring lunch and enjoyed a picnic dinner in the school room. I remember distinctly that Mrs. Reynolds, who lived in the Blakely district but whose boys were attending school here that

---

3 Huddle, Mrs. "History of District #17" (Madison County) 11/15/28.
4 Haight, Mrs. George. "Deer Creek School of Early Days" (Madison County)

season, brought a big chicken pie that we all enjoyed. All brought abundantly and the cooks were as good in those days as to-day. An elaborate program was given at this time. This was the only big community affair in those days."[5]

Agnes Wehenkel recalls that box socials were for her and her family very special events. As she described it the activities seemed quite elaborate, with due propriety, but a fun time for all. Her school was large enough to house the social indoors should weather be a problem.[6]

In Life in an American Denmark, Alfred Nielsen writes about activities in the folk school: "The students put on plays and many people from the community came to see these and enjoyed them very much. In my childhood all the plays presented were in the Danish language.

"Father and mother went to most of the meetings at the school. Baby sitters were unknown and we children often went with them. Before I knew who Shakespeare was I heard such names as Macbeth and Hamlet. There were many lectures by faculty members on literary and historical subjects. Quite often students and teachers had musical instruments and there was a little orchestra."[7]

The Danish folk schools were organized to train older young people and adults to retain their national heritage, so this type of school offered a faculty and programs that

5 Untitled account (ca. 1889) by early teacher, Nellie Brown. Madison County Historical Society.
6 Interview with Agnes Wehenkel, Madison, 10/17/80.
7 Nielsen, Alfred C. Life in An American Denmark. Grandview College, 1962. P.29.

offered families much more than the typical one-teacher school.

Teacher contracts sometimes spelled out requirements for community activities: "Lois Johnson returned for the 1934-1935 and her contract called for observance of rural patrons day and one public entertainment."[8]

Leonard Loftis, from Tekamah, said that his school, the "New England School" could not hold everyone for a Christmas program, so it was held at a nearby church.

Churches were frequent users of school buildings until they could build their own structures. In one instance in Washington County, near Herman, a church had been built in 1885, but the Europeans and the Scandinavians who used it fought so much that half the congregation left and held services in the nearby Glendale school.[9]

Mr. Loftis also recalls use of the New England School by the Germans as a church. The Farmer's Union used it for a meeting place, and he and another boy performed custodial work after these meetings.

Inez Naumann, a teacher at the Bloomfield School in Douglas County, said that the Farmer's Union met in her school, and that they had to bring their own lamps as the school did not have lighting in 1937.[10]

---

8 Johnson, Bob, grade 7 (student essay) "History of Dist. 68, Madison Cty. from 1887-1967"

9 Interview with Niels Miller, Herman, 12/6/80

10 Interview with Inez Naumann, Ralston, 1/13/81

In a letter to his grandson, David Launer, Leonard Loftis of Tekamah writes about a travelling troupe that would visit the New England School #23 near Herman: "Once in a while there was a group of entertainers would stop at the school house with covered wagons, trained dogs, trained birds, magician and musical instruments. They would put up a big tent on the school ground. We would hurry home from school, do our chores and the whole family would go back for a real treat."

Niels Miller, while being interviewed, noted that a musical troupe would occasionally stop at the Pleasantview School near Herman. A travelling photographer visited the school nearly every year to do student and family photographs.

Leonard Loftis mentioned that at one time basketball competition was tried between schools, but that like many other inter-school activities at the turn of the century was dropped because of lack of transportation. His alma mater, the New England School, now has an annual picnic which attracts many former students, though not as many of the younger ones as they would like.

(My research did not provide me any additional data beyond what is given. I found it difficult to pull specifics from persons interviewed, and could locate specifics in documents and literature reviewed, without relying on previously published materials too heavily.)

Addition to Dertien report on
COUNTRY SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITY CENTERS

from Pioneer Life in Nebraska Pamphlets. Series II, p. 9, WPA Writer's Program, Nebraska State Historical Society, 1941, "Interview With Mrs. Emma Reinke Bradshaw (Columbus):

I have told you that father had little schooling, (note: he was from Prussia & could speak Polish & High German. He read American newspapers constantly) but I forgot to tell you that for a short time Mr. I.N. Taylor (real estate dealer & 1871 secretary of the Nebraska State Emigration Society) taught a night school for the older people. Father attended those classes and must have learned some of the intricacies of the English language.

DEC 1981
ERIC/CRESS
RECEIVED

Nebraska

TEACHERS

Prepared by
James Dertien, 1/81

"A mob of mobile maidens meditating matrimony . . ." was one way of describing early frontier teachers.[1] Though teaching was an honored profession, many have admitted that it was not very lucrative. And many a young lady escaped into matrimony or some other profession as soon as the opportunity was made available. Besides serving as a teacher and disciplinarian, a teacher was usually the school's custodian.

Turnover was high, with some schools reporting a new teacher every term, some even having two or three in one term. It was usually quite unusual for early teachers to stay on for more than a couple of years, unless they lived with relatives nearby.

Before giving too much attention to typical teaching conditions in these early days some mention should be given to Nebraska's first school.

The fur traders were indirectly responsible for the first school in Nebraska territory, in that their presence along the Missouri made necessary the construction of the military post, Ft. Atkinson, north of Omaha, near Ft. Calhoun (name of municipality near which Ft. Atkinson Historical Site is being reconstructed).

"The first indication that a school was to be established came February 4, 1820, in a terse order from headquarters

1 Nielsen, Alfred C. Life In An American Denmark, quotation credited to Professor Hugo Munsterberg, p.77.

stating simply that 'Private George Stevenson of Battalion Company (C) is appointed teacher of the Regimental School and will be reported on daily duty.' No further record appears in the council books until January 24, 1822."[2]

In January, 1922, the quartermaster " . . . was ordered to 'put in suitable repair' a building outside the west gate of the barracks, to be used as a school room . . . " and that a non-commissioned officer be selected as teacher.[3]

A Sergeant Mumford was this next teacher. His base pay was eight dollars per month with an additional fifteen cents daily being paid from the regimental exchequer, which was built up gradually by the sale of products from the farm at the post. In June, 1823, instruction was interrupted temporarily while Sergeant Mumford rejoined his regiment on an expedition against theArikara Indians. Classes were resumed in October of that year.[4]

At one point in 1825 Mumford resigned then accepted the teaching job again. "He was also granted an extra whiskey ration. Perhaps stress is not a 20th century phenomenon for school teachers."[5] The additional spirits may have proved to be his undoing, for shortly after this a new teachers name appeared in reports.

In 1824 the garrison was dismantled and moved to Kansas, becoming Ft. Leavenworth. While in Nebraska it had become a self-supporting farm community. A library was established

---

2 Beggs, Walter Kenton. Frontier Education in Nebraska: A Thesis . . . University of Nebraska, 1939, p. 5.

3. Ibid. p. 6.

4. Ibid. p. 8.

5. Tilden's Centennial Journey 1880-1980. Service Press, 1980, p. 124.

comprising some five hundred volumes, and with the school it was actually the first cultural institution in the territory.[6]

The next school activity recorded in the territory came when missionary, Moses Merrill, "small, slender, and florid of complexion, he hardly typified the general notion of a man fitted for life on the frontier," arrived with Mrs. Merrill and his children in November of 1833 near Bellevue along the Missouri. He " . . . found that the seamy side of civilization had preceded him. Sickness, epidemics, cholera, and worst of all, drunkenness ravaged the tribe through all of the seven years of his work."[7]

In 1835 when the Otoe village was moved from Bellevue to a site six miles west of the mouth of the Platte, Merrill built a log home with an attached school. While he frequently succeeded in attracting children to the school and found that they were excellent students, he faced a continuing problem with traders, who constantly tried to undermine his efforts, usually winning the Indians over with whiskey. These traders " . . . did not wish the Indians either christianized or educated; the reason being that as long as they remained in ignorance, no difficulty would be experienced in handling them."[8]

In 1840 Merrill died. His frail health could not keep up with the rigors of the job. Other missionaries came and found their task equally demanding, so we can conclude that these early missionary schools for the Indians were not usually successful. And we would have to wait for the more formal

6 Beggs, p. 9.
7 Ibid. p. 17.
8. Ibid. p. 20-38.

introductions of schooling on the reservations before Indian education showed any sign of progress.

Once a location for a school was found the next step was the selection of a teacher. In many instances someone already in the neighborhood was found. Deer Creek School, which was founded in 1871 in Madison County, provides probably a typical example of the selection process:

> George Gray, a second bachelor, was chosen as teacher as all thought him the best qualified and too he was a cripple, both feet being amputated at the instep. He and two brothers were out in a raging blizzard for three days. They had gone hunting and became lost. Both brothers'toes were frozen off but George was left only his heels to walk on. This happened in Iowa in 1868. When the board approached George and made known their wishes, he said he would teach providing they would allow him to bring his horses along. It was agreed that school should open the first of April. So on the day appointed, we children all gathered at the old log hut. All were awaiting the arrival of our teacher. All at once one of the children commenced to laugh, as he pointed toward the old bachelor's home. True to his word there came George Gray with seven head of horses. He road one and the six followed behind. They came all through that term and it is hard to say who learned the most, we or the horses.[9]

Another male teacher from Madison County was Tunis Voorhees:

> Tunis Voorhees, the teacher, usually called "Van" rather than by his first name, is best remembered from his appearance as he came to school riding a very small pony. He was a heavy set man, and was out of proportion to the little steed, making an odd figure. His children must have walked, as there was certainly no room on the steed.
>
> Mr. Voorhees was a man who seemed old to the pupils. That may have been 35 or more. . . . He was a man of considerable education, and of marked ability, a worker in church, a leader in singing, public spirited, and a man highly thought of.[10]

---

9 Haight, Mrs. George (Florence Lewis), "Deer Creek School of Early Days" (Madison County), Madison County Historical Society, n.d.

10 "The Second Year of School District No. One Madison Co." As a Pupil, James Dover Remembers It. Madison County Historical Society, nd.

One young man, B.C. Jones, writes, "It was in 1887 that I went to Custer County as a young man of 20 years of age . . . The next year I took my examination for teaching . . . The first [schoo[] I tried . . . the clerk ...litely advised me that they wanted a man for a teacher and not a boy."[11]

When Jones finally did secure a job and located the home of a school board member, after some difficulty pronouncing Bohemian names, he discovered that "No one wanted to board the teacher" but that a bachelor agreed to board him for two weeks until a permanent place could be found. "When they found a permanent boarding place for me, it was not so pleasant walking three miles through the wind and storm but this lady was a model housekeeper."[12]

Another teacher who started in Custer county in 1887 was Miss Euroia Weimer, who " . . . was only fourteen years old at the time of her teaching experience at Dale and only two of the board would sign her contract on account of her age. However, she said, 'If I fail, you need not pay me.' The second term all three members signed the contract."[13]

Some young female teachers discovered they had to board with families in small one room cabins with only a curtain providing privacy from any males in the household. Nellie

---

11 Jones, B.C. "My First Term in a Dugout Schoolhouse", Pioneer Stories of Custer County, Nebraska. Custer County Chief, 1936, pp. 161-163.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid. p. 107.

Brown recalls boarding " . . . with the Bentleys, who lived in a small three room house. Mr. Bentley was a carpenter and was away from home most of the time. In this home, there was one bed room, long and narrow. Mrs. Bentley and I occupied the bed and the three children slept in the trundle bed, which was pulled out from under the foot of the bed."[14]

Cora Beels, who taught in 1874, tells that her " . . . bed was a straw tick laid on the floor, in a room only the weather-boards between me and the wintry winds. It was a mile-and-a-half walk to my schoolhouse, where I built my own fires, and taught about 20 pupils. It was nothing to look out from the door or windows and see Indians stalking by."[15]

Cora Beels used the income from this teaching job to start college. She later taught music, then took up a "timber claim" where she raised beans and chickens to earn more money for college. It took her ten years to complete college in this fashion.[16]

In History and Stories of Nebraska, Sheldon explains that "Frontier school boards were often good hunters and trappers, having little knowledge of books, and many amusing stories are told of the examinations given by them [to aspiring teachers]. Sometimes the school board and teacher got into an argument over what was the right answer to a question.

---

14 (Unpublished, untitled account by early teacher, Nellie Brown, ca. 1889) Madison County Historical Society.

15 W.P.A. Writer's Project. Pioneer Life in Nebraska Pamphlets, Series I, p. 3 -- "Interview With Cora A. Beels (Norfolk)"

16 Ibid.

The law provided for a county superintendent, but the salary allowed was so small that few cared for the office and in some counties there was none. So these first Nebraska schools were run very much as each neighborhood wished."[17]

Teacher's salaries were normally quite low. In one record we note that "because the length of the school terms was so uncertain, teachers . . . were often paid by the day, and records indicate that Lottie Hadley, who taught in District 17 in 1911-12 was paid between $1.42 and $1.50 per day, per haps depending upon the number of pupils she had."[18]

"A teacher remarked that one of the most trying problems in teaching in the larger early schools was the matter of giving assignments. Many times there were no two students with identical books. In 1891 the Free Textbook Law, one of the first in the United States, was added to Nebraska's statutes. This did not mean, of course, that all schools complied with the law immediately."[19]

Constantly appearing in interviews and in written accounts of early teaching experiences are stories of problems with student discipline. Frank Grady recalls "The first teacher in Raymond school was run out by the boys, who used stones as weapons of the assault. The second met the same

17 Sheldon, Addison Erwin. History and Stories of Nebraska. Chicago, University Publishing Co., 1914, p. 244.
18 Tilden's Centennial Journey 1880-1980. Service Press, 1980, p. 125.
19 Ibid. p. 126.

gang, but when he had soundly thrashed one boy, and the youth's father coming to take up the battle shared the same fate, the reign of terror ended abruptly, and a new respect for the school was established."[20]

With teachers like "J.W. Kerns who used to pull up the window and spit a gob of tobacco juice clean down to Main Street . . . the discipline on the whole was pretty good . . . There were no high-falootin laws, and the teacher could whale the very devil out of you if it would aid in your 'bringin' to time'."[21]

Grady recalls a story about a teacher who " . . . was already in the school on New Years Day, and they threw brimstone --sulphur I reckon it's called--down the chimney and smoked him out, getting possession of the premises . . . Quite a percentage of the big fellows in the school considered the teacher Public Enemy Number One. The worst thing of all was when the parents took up the battle of the kids . . . That happened quite often and they vowed that if the kids couldn't put the teacher out, they would. They usually got the worst of it, however."[22]

In some schools when winter arrived and it was no longer necessary for the older boys to work, school boards would hire ~~male~~ female teachers to temporarily replace the females while the older boys were in attendance at the school. Grace Thompson, whose father, Dan Thompson, started McCarthy School, District 29, in Washington County in 1875, tells that "One teacher had

20 W.P.A. Writer's Project. Pioneer Life in Nebraska Pamphlets, Series II, p. 25 -- "Interview With Frank Grady (Raymond)"
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.

as many as 75 pupils during the winter when they couldn't farm. Students drove some teachers out (hard to handle). Finally, Mr. Van Duesen (Jimmy) went to teach. He laid a gun across the top of his desk. He said, 'Boys, I'm here for business--to teach.' He didn't have any trouble."[23]

There were many male teachers who could handle even the roughest circumstances, be they students or teachers. Charles Wertz of Richland, for instance, was very good with a gun. He frequently took leaves of absence from his school to join cattle drives, to work as a "fence rider", to hunt horse thieves, to serve as a payroll courier and to join posses searching for criminals. And while doing all of this he continued to attend college and teach rural schools.[24]

Physical strength, though sometimes necessary, was not always necessary, for there are many examples of women teachers whose attitude and technique gained the respect of students, regardless of occasional ornery temperaments.

Much emphasis has been given to the teachers, though superintendents in the counties were often the unsung heroes who stood behind the teachers, secured better salaries for them, worked to give them better training, etc. C.W. Crum, a county superintendent for Madison county about the turn of the century, was an early day educational activist. He was always quite proud of his teachers. He began his work with

23 Story related to Betty Larsen, Orum, by Grace Thompson, 1980.
24 W.P.A. Writer's Project. Pioneer Life in Nebraska Pamphlets, Series II, pp.10-18--"Interview With Charles Wertz (Richland) 1940.

no real background:

> When I started out to call on the rural schools, I went as far away as I could and called on 62 in the S.W. corner of the county. Miss Tena Thompson was teacher and Miss Anna Torgerson was visiting her that day. They were scared stiff and I was scared worse. They were the finest type of Norwegian, and the finest type of teachers - the kind we want to keep in the work, but unfortunately for the schools, the kind that get married. . . . A few days later I called at No. 10 west of Battle Creek, Miss Pearl Reese, teacher . . . one of the best teachers I have known. Quiet and sweet and modest and forceful.[25]

The teachers soon got over their fear of Mr. Crum and learned that they could depend on him to rush to their aid whenever help was needed.

> Such a call from Battle Creek once started me out in a temperature 16 below, and a stiff wind from the northwest. Three miles out, a man stopped me saying, "Crum, your nose is frozen white." I thawed it out with my mitten, and carried it in my hand the rest of the way. I stopped at No. 9 to get warm.[26]

As county superintendent a person would not only be responsible for examining and certifying nearly all teachers, but would often give examinations for eighth grade graduation to students, so these person were constantly aware of the conditions in which they worked.

C.W. Crum viewed the examination process for new teachers as less than useful: "Towards the end I was quite convinced I could tell about as much of teaching ability by the way a girl fixed her hair, the fit of her shirtwaist and the hang of her skirt as by what she could tell on paper."[27]

---

25 (Unpublished, untitled typed letter about his work as Madision County Superintendent, by C.W. Crum) Madison County Historical Society.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

One of Crum's beefs which he soon got all county superintendents involved in was the over-emphasis high schools in the state were giving to normal school training. Considering the small percentage of students who chose to become teachers, he and the other superintendents felt that high schools should stop preparing everyone for college entrance or teaching, and offer basic training of more use to the majority. Their efforts to introduce legislation and change met,at the time, with much resistance.

One of Nebraska's more famous teachers was John G. Neihardt. In commenting on his training he says, "The chief entrance requirements of the old Nebraska Normal College seemed to be the applicant's conscious ignorance and his determination to do something about it. There were some whose education had been limited to occasional attendance at a country school in the dead of winter when there was nothing more important to do. Those were out to overtake fast-fleeting opportunity, and they were excellent students in general."[28]

As with many who went through the Normal School process, the real learning began on the job. These teachers have a record they can be proud of.

---

28 Neihardt, John G. All Is But A Beginning, Youth Remembered, 1881-1901. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972,p. 100.

DEC 1981
ERIC/CRESS
RECEIVED

On March 16, 1855 the First Territorial Legislature of Nebraska, while meeting in Omaha, prepared and offered to the Governor for his signature the first school law, making the Territorial Librarian the first Superintendent of Public Instruction, and organizing counties as the logical sub-divisions for school government.[1]

County superintendents were to be chosen with their initial duties being to divide the county into districts and to notify the residents to proceed to organize. However, nothing in the law required the schools to be opened, and once opend they could be closed or continued at the pleasure of the people.[2]

Since no taxable base, land being the logical choice, was available, this being so because the federal government held title and did not release the lands until Nebraska became a state in 1867, the provisions of this school law were of no practical value. Schools were costly, and without the means to provide the finances problems arose immediately between what the public wanted and officials could organize.[3]

By 1859 twenty-nine schools had been established with " . . . 277 children (out of a total enumeration of 4767) in average daily attendance taught by twenty male and

1 Beggs, Walter Kenton. Frontier Education in Nebraska: A Thesis . . . University of Nebraska, 1939, pp. 43-46.
2 Ibid, p. 47.
3 Ibid, pp. 52-68

twenty-two female teachers. . . . Only eight of the seventeen counties reporting had organized any schools, and twenty of the twenty-nine were in four counties, Cass, Nemaha, Douglas and Washington, and more than a third of them were in Cass and Nemaha alone."[4]

After 1867 development proceeded rapidly. However, an interesting sidelight is that compulsory education "was rejected by a resounding majority in 1871, and as late as 1883 it was referred to in the press as 'a case of delirium tremens,' but the Populist legislature of 1891 enacted a compulsory school law which guaranteed the opportunity for a common school education to all young Nebraskans."[5]

So the way was paved, though the roads were not, for students like young Alva T. Anderson to attend school, getting there in 1890 by walking "over hills, through barbed wire fences, and through Ira W. Olive's large herd of cattle. Sometimes we would have to put on speed and outrun a longhorn and dive into a chokecherry patch. One fall morning my two sisters and I were going up the canyon on our way home from school. At our left on the side of the hill there were nine coyotes, one following the other. I believe they were hungry, and had gotten the scent of our dinner pails, so they trailed us."[6]

Arriving,the students might have sat at a 3 X 12 table placed in the middle of the room or at benches along the

4 Ibid, p. 88.
5 Olson, James C. History of Nebraska. University of Nebraska Press, 1955, p. 351.
6 Sod House Memories, Volumes I-II-III. Sod House Society, 1972, p. 96 (Lexington, Alva T. Andersen).

wall. Student John Mills recalls that "A lot of toe tramping and other deviltry went on under that table. We had a few weeks school that summer, about twenty-five attending, hardly two readers alike, which suited some of us fine, as we'd borrow different books to read. Our writing material was a slate and pencil, the pencils often decorated with a flag."[7]

Student Fred Graves observed, "I went to school right here in District 47, Crounse School, in the year of '85. The old schoolhouse was here then . . . There weren't any grades, just readers, and they were pretty limited. Some of the big boys came to school that fall, and I remember George Lipman asked the teacher what readers she had, and she said she had only four. He went home, saying that wasn't enough, and he couldn't get anything at that school since he already had read the fourth reader."[8]

Supplies of appropriate reading materials were often limited, with the new schools depending on what families could provide from personal collections.

"In 1887, a report of the visit of the county superintendent Mr. Crumm is left. It was a very cold day, October 26. He arrived at the 'very old' school house 20 by 30 frame building at 9 A.M. It had no vestibule, no bookcase. No globe, one map, no books of reference; Miss Ella Cooper, aged 23 was

7 Pioneer Stories of Custer County, Nebraska. Custer County Chief, 1936, p. 91 "A Boy's Life in '79" by John C. Mills.

8 WPA Writer's Program. Pioneer Life in Nebraska Pamphlets. Series I, p. 26, "Interview With Fred Graves (Raymond)."

teacher. . . . the school room was 'neat and pleasant', the 14 pupils 'orderly, quiet, studious, obedient and interested.' They were 'very well advanced' . . ."[9]

School terms were in the early years organized to match the weather or the need for children to help on the farms with crops. In District 34 (Madison County) " . . . the early years three terms were held in one year: a fall term of two months, a winter term was four months, and a spring term was two months. One month vacation was taken for corn shucking. Because of the three term sometimes there were also three teacher year."[10]

Another report was that "the shortest school term was two months. The first ninemonth term was in the period of 1888-1889. The only one of recent years not of nine months duration was at the time of the flu epidemic in 1918-1919 when school was closed for three months."[11]

Leonard Loftis of Tekamah wrote his grandson that "As soon as I was big enough to drive a team of horses I would get to stay home and help plow with three horses on a riding plow. Then in the fall I would stay home and help pick corn by hand. . . . It was not uncommon to miss school for weeks at a time."[12]

---

9 (Unpublished) "Notes on the History of District Ten" (Madison County), by Eleanor C. Snyder.

10 (Unpublished) "District 34" (Madison County), by Sharyl Linda Roewert, 8th grade, 1967

11 (Unpublished) "History of District 27" (Madison County), by Pam Volk.

12 Loftis, Leonard. Letter to grandson for school assignment. Tekamah, NE, n.d.

The stories about punishment vary considerably. At times it was difficult to determine who was being punished. George Snowden recalls "Them days they taught school with a ruler and a hickory stick. I had several fights with the teacher and climbed all over her. Hattie McCone, her name was. She had a big bunch of hair on her head which we called a waterfall, and I would get a holt of that and pull it."[13]

And at times parents sided with their children in battles with the teacher, with the teacher usually besting both. And it was usually the older boys who got into the most trouble. John Mills remembered that one "noon recess three of the boys didn't come in when the bell rang, someone was sent to call them in. They said for the teacher to go to one of the three worlds. The boy came and told Dalrymple what they said. As the teacher was out of chewing tobacco and more cross than usual, he threw off his coat and picked up a four foot stove poker and went out and wasn't long in bringing those boys to school."[14]

Agnes Wehenkel remembers in a nearby parochial school that misbehavers would be asked to kneel facing a wall, with small pebbles placed beneath their knees.[15] William Brosh recalls "that he was tied to the teacher's desk by a string attached to his finger."[16] This second punishment

13 WPA Writer's Project. Pioneer Life in Nebraska Pamphlets, Series I, "Interview With George F. Snowden (Omaha).

14 Pioneer Stories of Custer County, Nebraska, Custer County Chief, 1939, p. 91, "A Boy's Life in '79", by John C. Mills

15 Interview With Agnes Wehenkel, Madison, 10/17/80.

16 (Unpublished) "Short History of Fairview District #9" (Madison County), by William Brosh.

was certainly less severe than the pebbles under knees. Other students recall that teachers had absolutely no trouble maintaining order and securing good behavior. Alton Larsen said he wanted to be good for one teacher because she was so beautiful, and the teacher that followed her used just the right, firm tone of voice as effectively as others had used switches.[17]

The teachers usually lasted at their jobs only a short while, arriving at jobs many times almost the same age as their students, and saddled with considerable responsibility and little to aid their instructional program. Some were ambitious like "Mr. Holcomb . . . eager to improve things around the schoolhouse as well as to teach the pupils to the utmost of his ability. He taught us to read music, to sing, and besides our regular lessons, tried to teach us good manners at school and in our homes."[18] Or, the " . . . wonderful teacher, a widow about forty years old. She loved us and we all loved her. She taught us a lot of pretty verses. In history and geography we sang the capitols and dates."[19] There was " . . . Agnes Carberry . . . She brought with her a big book of pictures to teach the smaller children the sounds. Sometimes she threatened to put the bigger

17 Interview with Alton Larsen, Blair, 12/13/80.

18 Pioneer Stories of Custer County, Nebraska. p. 125, "Cooperville School and Early News Items," by Berna Hunter Chrisman.

19 Sod House Memories, Volumes I-II-III. Sod House Society, 1972, p. 155.

children with the smaller children because they were so interested in the picture book. This was a new idea in teaching at this time."[20]

Going to school involved duties beyond being simply a student. "About once a year we had scrubbing day, and all hands helped. Every desk was scoured, cobwebs swept, windows cleaned and the floor scrubbed until we felt it nice enough to eat off."[21] And in some schools the floor boards were lifted so that long-missing pencils and other odds and ends could be retrieved.

Play equipment was usually non-existant or limited. "The children didn't have any play ground equipment. They usually played ball. They had to make their own balls, out of rags, stockings, and paper."[22] Or, they played " . . . andi-andi over, pump, pump, pull away, drop the handkerchief and such games, the teacher oft times joining in these games. As much enthusiasm was shown in these games as is shown today in a football or basketball game."[21] Leonard Loftis recalls being thrown back and forth through the transom above the entrance to his school when he was small.[23] Obviously typical of inventive older boy imaginations! Skating was always popular if a pond or creek was located nearby. The fifteen-minute recess was standard just as it is today.

---

20 (Unpublished) "History of Dist. 16, Madison County" (No author, handwritten -- Madison County Historical Society)

21 (Untitled account by early teacher--Nellie Brown, ca 1889, located in Madison County Historical Society)

22 (Unpublished) "My School Years Ago" by Pamel Johnson

23 Interview with Leonard Loftis, Tekamah, 12/6/80

Eventually the money was available to improve the schools, and aside from structural improvements, new desks and a regulation blackboard, each school tried to build a small collection of books. In Custer County, for instance, referral was made to "An Act to Provide Cheaper Text Books, and for District Ownership of Same," approved April 7, 1891, the school board entered into a three-year contract with the American Book company, by which they could buy books at a specified minimum price. Prices were quoted on Harper's readers, McGuffy's Revised Eclectic Speller, Ray's Arithmetic, Harvey's Grammar, Barnes' History of the United States, Spencerian Copy Books, etc. Checks show $146.28, or $18.28 yearly, spent for books and supplies from this company during the next eight years."[24]

About 1903, on a small printed bookmark, the Nebraska Public Library Commission announced that last year, "Richardson County spent over $1700 on school libraries, making it the banner library county. Hall County spent an average of $10 a district for library books. Burt, Butte, Cedar, Douglas, Dundy, Merrick, Otoe, Pawnee, Rock and Sarpy Counties spent an average of $5 a district on library books. Supt. Stahl of Cuming county attended 50 box socials at which money was raised to buy library books."

The law creating the Nebraska Public Library Commission went into effect June 28, 1901, the result of six years of

24 Pioneer Stories of Custer County, Nebraska, Custer County Chief, 1936, p. 107.

work by friends of libraries and education. In its "First Biennial Report" the Commission's secretary, Edna D. Bullock, reports, "Next to the establishment and improvement of public libraries, our interest has centered in the school libraries of the state. Much money is spent annually for library books by our school districts--some of it aimlessly and extravagantly."[25]

Edna Bullock's referral to aimless spending was probably supported by comments from Madison County superintendent C.W. Crum, who indicated that he had organized the state's school boards into three sections, and " . . . had them adopt a uniform list of books for rural schools, which after a strenous fight with the American Book Company, was completed. I was offered a free trip to the N.E.A. at Boston to just leave the book matter alone, by the A.B.C. agent, and maneuvered till I got his bribe in writing, and then published it openly which resulted in his removal from the state."[26]

But regardless of certain disreputable salesmen the school districts did need guidance and the Nebraska Public Library Commission came to their rescue in a variety of ways. One of the first efforts was publication in June, 1902 of a "List of Books for School Libraries" which was distributed through county superintendent offices to all teachers in the state. The introduction to this list is especially well-written, so it is included below along with a sample from the book list:

---

25 First Biennial Report of the Nebraska Public Library Commission. Lincoln, November 30, 1902.

26 (Untitled, typewritten account of his career, prepared by C.W. Crum, Madison County)

INTRODUCTION.

In publishing and distributing a list of books for school libraries, it is the desire of this Commission to help the schools of the state to get the greatest possible return for the money they spend on school libraries—not the largest number of volumes, but the largest number of good, well-bound and printed, and carefully selected books.

Discriminating care in the selection of books for a school library is so imperative if the books are to accomplish what a school library ought to accomplish, that the secretary of this Commission has cheerfully devoted much time to comparing the best lists of the kind in print, and to studying the books themselves. It is not enough that a book should be a *good* book—it must be good for *something*, or it is a waste of money to put it in a school library. In many of the school libraries of Nebraska there are cheap, unattractive editions of books of recognized standing—the English and other classics. These are well enough, in their way, but they are a poor beginning for a school library if not reinforced by the best child's literature. The primary function of a school library is to provide supplementary material for school use. Another, and equally important function is to enable children to form the reading habit, and to introduce them to the best in literature. That school that contents itself with teaching the mere mechanical art of reading, leaving the pupils to grope blindly through the literary wilderness for a lifetime, falls far short of the requirements of the twentieth century. If children are taught to use books, and given some means of obtaining good and useful books, much that it now seems imperative for the school to attempt may safely be left to the voluntary self-education of the people.

Any graded list of books for schools must be based on the assumption that children have been reading from the first grade on up. It is a great mistake to select the school library chiefly for the high school and upper grammar grades. In the use of books and the appreciation of literature, it is as true as of any other form of mental development that

> "we build the ladder by which we rise
> From the lowly earth to the vaulted skies,
> And we mount to its summit round by round."

If anybody must be neglected in the selection of books for the school library, let it be the older children. Children who have not had opportunity to read in the grades are not ready for the literature course in the high school.

The following list is planned to include the best supplementary literature, and some of the best literature of enjoyment. The standard authors in English and American literature have been somewhat sparingly included because it is assumed that the schools already have them or have planned to get them.

THIRD GRADE.

Andrews, Jane. Each and all.	Ginn	.50	.48
——— Stories Mother Nature told her children.	Ginn	.50	.48
Bell, A. F. Victor in Buzland.	Flanagan	.25	.22
Brooks, Dorothy. Stories of the red children.	Ed. pub. co.	.40	.28
Eddy, S. J. Friends and helpers.	Ginn	.00	.52
Eggleston, Edward. First book in American history.	Am. bk. co.	.00	.52
——— Stories of great Americans for little Americans	Am. bk. co.	.40	.33
Field, Eugene. With trumpet and drum.	Scribner	1.00	.65
Fletcher, R. H. Marjorie and her papa.	Century	1.00	.68
Humphrey, F. A. How New England was made.	Lothrop	1.25	.82
Jackson, H. H. Hunter cats of Connorloa	Little	.50	.35
Gould, A. W. Mother Nature's children.	Ginn	.60	.52
Kirby, Mary & Elizabeth. Aunt Martha's corner cupboard			

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

	Flanagan	.40	.33
Muller, Mary. Little people of the snow	Flanagan	.35	.30
——— Story of Wretched Flea	Flanagan	.35	.30
Peary, J. D. Snow baby	Stokes	1.30	1.00
Pierson, C. D. Among the farm-yard people	Dutton	1.25	.82
Pratt, M. L. Stories from old Germany	Ed. pub. co.	.60	.42
——— Stories of colonial children	Ed. pub. co.	.60	.42
White, E. O. When Molly was six	Houghton	1.00	.65

FOURTH GRADE.

Alcott, L. M. Eight cousins	Little	1.50	.00
Bellamy, B. W. & Goodwin, M. W. eds. Open sesame. v. 2 and 3	Ginn (ea.)	.75	.63
Blaisdell, A. F. Stories from English history	Ginn	.40	.35
——— Story of American history	Ginn	.60	.52
Brooks, E. S. True story of Abraham Lincoln	Lothrop	1.50	.75
Chase, A. and Clowe, E. Stories of industry. 2 v.	Ed. pub. co. (ea.)	.60	.42
Defoe, Daniel. Robinson Crusoe	Ginn	.35	.30
Drake, S. A. On Plymouth Rock	Lee & Shepard	.60	.39
Gilman, Arthur. Colonization of America	Lothrop	.60	.52
——— Discovery and exploration of America	Lothrop	.45	.39
Holder, C. F. Along the Florida reef	Appleton	1.50	.98

The Public Library Commission proclaimed that the most important feature of its work was the traveling library. In 1902 they had thirty collections of forty volumes each traveling about the state. They remained three months in one place, before being returned to Lincoln for inspection and the taking of statistics. The Commission reported "phenomenal" circulation with these traveling collections. The 840 volumes were loaned 5,521 times in ten months, an average of 6.5 loans per volume, being much better than that experienced in public libraries.[27]

The statistics prompted Edna Bullock to remark, "If any judgment can be deduced from these facts, it seems as if Nebraska might some day add to her supremacy regarding illiteracy, a much-more-to-be coveted reputation for not only knowing *how* to read, but knowing *what* to read."[28]

These traveling libraries were very useful in providing rural communities with badly needed materials until they

27 First Biennial Report of the Nebraska Public Library Commission, Lincoln, November 30, 1902, p. 6.

28 Ibid.

could arrange to purchase their own collections.

In addition to these efforts the Commission, in 1905, placed sample $25 collections of books in each of the Junior normal schools, noting the intent of these collections "to promote the more intelligent use of books by the teachers in charge of the schools. The great drawback is not so much the scarcity of books as the teacher's ignorance of what the books contain, and how to use such material as happens to drift her way."[29] The letter accompanying the collection offered some hints on better utilization of books and some ideas for exercises to be used by normal school instructors.

"Library Days" were organized by the Public Library Commission " . . . to furnish the teacher some way of arousing the interest of pupils and patrons in the building up of a school library. If possible, money should be raised to buy at least $5 worth of books to display for the patrons' inspection on that day." The Commission provided topics and ideas for the promotion of the collections, with special emphasis on showing parents that good use was being made of books already owned. The ideas offered showed a great deal of resourcefulness:

> The "Special day programs" contain only general suggestions for Library day. The authors' birthday programs it would be well to leave for special days—indeed some author of note should be given an hour or two at least once a month. Children will not care about authors until they know and like some of their writings. From one author day to another, let the children read and prepare for the author day that is to come. Select your authors several months in advance, and get the children to help you get together all possible material by and about the author. You will thus be having library days throughout the year.

29 (Letter to Junior normal schools) dated Lincoln, June 9, 1905. (Signed) Edna D. Bullock, Secy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

For the author for Library day, this year, I suggest Robert Louis Stevenson. For a week or two before the time, let the pupils search out and bring in all the Stevenson material in the district. The younger children will delight in the "Child's garden of verses." The others may read "Treasure island." The eighth grade pupils ought to have the "Christmas sermon," "Silverado squatters," and the "Wrecker"—or any other of Stevenson's writings. A simple little program would include the recitation of the "Lamplighter," "My shadow," "The cow," by the smaller children. Many of the verses have been set to music, and the little people will enjoy learning to sing them. Almost any modern collection of children's songs will contain some of them. The older pupils can discuss "Treasure island," and then a few minutes can be devoted to giving the children such an account of

In this quotation, and in the love of so many people—the good and reat, the young and playful, the gracious and witty, the simple and uncivilized, the princely minds of the English speaking world—find the keynote o an inspiring and lovable character. The loyalty, courage, and perseverance of such a character should inspire your pupils to greater effort in their essay and other undertakings.

To prepare this program, you should have the following:—

Child's garden of verses, Rand, McNally ed.	.50
Treasure island " "	.40

These two are especially valuable for their biographical notes. By special arrangement with the state agent of Rand, McNally, the above mentioned books will be sent postpaid to any Nebraska school for 45 cents and 36 cents, respectively. Order of Rand, McNally & Co., Chicago.

In addition get the following, if possible:—

Christmas sermon	$ .50
Silverado squatters	1.00
Black Life of Stevenson	.75

In many attics of Nebraska are quantities of old magazines. Try to get hold of the following numbers:—

Scribner's magazine, October, 1895, May and June, 1896.
McClure's magazine, September, 1894, February, 1895.
Any standard periodical of 1895 *may* contain sketches of Stevenson's life.

NEBRASKA
PUBLIC LIBRARY COMMISSION.

Library Day, October 20, 1905

The Friday nearest October 21 has, by common consent, been set aside by Nebraska schools, to be observed as Library day. Every school in Nebraska is urged to make Library day in 1905 count in the direction of more and better school libraries.

The general topic suggested for special attention this year is the Louisiana purchase, its exploration and development and present condition, with special reference to the Lewis and Clark story, and the settlement of the great northwest. Every Nebraska child of sufficient age should be familiar with the history and geography of the Lewis and Clark expedition. No more picturesque or thrilling incident of exploration adorns the pages of our history. Here was a band of men who carried an exceptionally perilous undertaking to a conscientious and successful finish, with no notion of extorting excessive reward or receiving honor or power from their fellow men. This page of our history is well worth re-reading by older people, in these days when newspapers and magazines flaunt tales of civic corruption forever before our eyes. The simple annals of these men who did their work well because they had agreed to do it should be told annually by our firesides. Let us use Library day to awaken new interest in this good, old story, and to increase our knowledge of the resources of the wonderful northwestern states.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The particular object of the day should be to add to the school library a few good books on the West, and to learn to use them. It is suggested that a few dollars be raised at once, and expended for the following books:-

		List Price.	Net Price.	Postage.
Wheeler	Trail of Lewis and Clark, 2 vol.	$6.00	$4.75	$.40
Lighton	Lewis and Clark	.50	.42	.07
Brooks	First across the continent	1.50	1.20	.14
Kingsley	Story of Lewis and Clark	.25	.21	.04
Hitchcock	Louisiana purchase	.60	.50	.10

The first book in this list is a history of the Lewis and Clark expedition, with fine descriptions of the country as it now is. The illustrations are an education in themselves, and it is hoped that all grammar and high school pupils in Nebraska may have access to this book. The other books in this list are suited to the various lower grades. The net prices given above are the prices for which the St. Paul book and stationery Co., St. Paul, Minn., will sell these books to Nebraska school districts, the postage to be paid by the purchaser, and the money sent with the order.

After studying such material, the teacher should be able to make her own program. The story of Sacajawea, the "Bird woman" should be made a feature of the day. In many school districts, someone who was present at the unveiling of the Sacajawea monument at Portland, will be willing to come to the school house and tell the children about it. A large wall or blackboard map may be used for some pupil to trace the Lewis and Clark trail, another pupil may tell something of what the explorers did and saw, and others may tell what they would see if they should go over the trail now. Particular attention should be paid to the present condition of the entire country from St. Louis to Seattle and Portland. Pictures illustrating the scenery and industries of the northwest should be collected and used. The story of irrigation should be told. Make the day count for interest in the school library, and knowledge of our country.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Edna Bullock observed in the "Second Biennial Report" of the Commission that there was nothing on the statute books requiring or even encouraging school districts to possess books aside from text-books, so they were hopeful that their efforts to contact the 6,666 school districts of the state was helpful.[30]

Noting from many accounts how parents tried to keep the education going when school was closed on account of weather or other circumstances, these small, growing libraries encouraged by the Commission probably found their way into the homes of many Nebraskans to be read and reread by students and parents alike.

30 Second Biennial Report of the Nebraska Public Library Commission. Lincoln, November 30, 1904, p. 6.

DEC 1981
ERIC/CRESS
RECEIVED

Nebraska

EARLY ETHNIC EDUCATION

Prepared by
James Dertien, 1/81

"In this period from 1870 to 1880 many colonies of settlers came to the state. Irish colonies settled Holt County in 1874 and Greeley County in 1877. Germans settled in Madison, Stanton and Thayer counties in 1867-1870. The Swedes settled in Polk and Saunders counties about 1870 and in Phelps and Burt counties about 1880. Bohemians founded colonies in Knox, Colfax, Saunders and Saline counties about 1870. Russian Germans began to settle Jefferson county about 1874 and extended their settlements into Clay and Hamilton counties. Danish, Swedish, Bohemian and Polish colonies found homes in Howard and Valley counties. French settlements were made in Richardson, Nemaha, Antelope and other counties."[1]

Nebraska represented for many of these people an opportunity to capture the free choices offered in their ideal of America. Assimilation of American customs and the learning a new language was slow in these first generations. Because they colonized into comfortable communities filled with their native countrymen, had their own newspapers, spoke their own language, etc., they were not under much pressure to quickly learn the new. Those who lived in mixed settlements became Americanized more quickly. But whatever their situation most were concerned that their children learn English and become full-fledged Americans. And it was often through what the children learned that the parents

1 Sheldon, Addison Erwin. History and Stories of Nebraska. University Publishing, 1914, p.266.

eventually became Americans.

Though the process was not always easy. In some instances ethnic background and a strong work ethic in coming to this country displayed an intentional early disregard for education. One Greek immigrant felt that it was not important for everyone to get an education, that important trades could be learned on the job, "In Greece study hard. All subjects obligatory--In this country, take this, take that -- children don't know . . . . In this country everyone go to school--not practical--all book learning."[2]

One writer who prepared a W.P.A. paper on Italian immigration commented, "Education of both the foreign-born and native-born Italians has been responsible more than anything else for counteracting the factors retarding assimilation. In the early years of immigration, the Italians engrossed in the all important task of earning a living were generally indifferent in regard to education. They had no knowledge of the American language, and being "greenhorns" were subject to prejudice and oftentimes ridicule of native Americans. This in itself was enough to keep the immigrant Italians from "mixing" and their children from regular school attendance."[3]

In Studies in Urban Sociology, T. Earl Sullenger noted that the " . . . children . . . are in the schools, learning

2 WPA Writer's Project interview with George Cosmas (Omaha), University of Nebraska at Omaha collection.

3 Works Project Administration. The Italians of Omaha. Independent Printing Company, 1941.

the English language and American manners; but this constitutes a complicating rather than a remedial factor. The child, educated in the American school, comes to look with disrespect upon his parents; he is ashamed of their foreign speech, foreign dress, and old world ideas and standards. He serves as an interpreter between his parents and American life; and, as a result, builds up a superiority complex in the home, disregards parental authority and resists all attempts at parental discipline."[4]

There was evidence in the experiences of the immigrants to prove this, but, likewise, there was evidence of considerable ethnic pride and strong family units which kept this from happening.

The Danes, for instance, established their folk schools for purposes of providing young people with an education in Danish heritage. Those too young to attend the folk schools were given this training in summer vacation schools.

"Taking children out of school in order to emigrate was, as far as the best interests of the children were concerned, often a regretable step, since in most overseas countries, they would often never get a chance to return to school, partly because of language difficulties, and partly because of the lack of public schools as provided in Denmark. . . . In some cases the "ticket to America" may have substituted for an education of some kind."[5]

4 (Recorded in WPA Writer's Project File of Omaha interviews) Excerpts from Studies in Urban Sociology, by T. Earl Sullenger, p.82.

5 Hvidt. Kristian. Flight to America, the Social Background of 300,000 Danish Emigrants. Academic Press, 1975, p.74.

And, as they first arrived and settled, the act of establishing employment or homesteading required the children to work. "Their labor was indispensable and consequently there was not much time for school--if there was school at all."[6]

In the interviews conducted for this project and in several W.P.A. Writer's Project interviews surveyed it was obvious that language proved an initial barrier in the educational process, but none of those interviewed seem to express opinions that the difficulty was long-lasting or proved a strain to the process. The students seemed eager to learn and become Americanized, and the teachers seemed to take it in stride.

One teacher, a Mrs. Torgerson, said, "One of the greatest troubles I had was that all the pupils would not speak English. They all wanted to talk Norwegian. In order to get them to read, I had to adopt different devices of my own inventions."[7]

Recounted below are the experiences of a number of children with varied ethnic backgrounds:

An English girl remembers her first day in school in Papillion, "When the pupils sang America, she arose and remained standing until the song was finished, it being the same tune of God Save the King. Of course the pupils looked quizically at her and being a new pupil she was embarrassed to tears."[8] She also recalled that it did not take her long to learn American slang, words that were soon forbidden for use in the household by her mother.

---

6 Ibid. p. 261.

7 (Unpublished) Johnson, Myrtle. "History of District 58" (Madison County), Madison County Historical Society.

8 W.P.A. Writer's Project, Omaha Interview Series, Interview with Mrs. C.H. Ross.

William Cole commented, " . . . the same year I started school [delayed by scarlet fever] , when I was 13, I also started trading horses. [This became his life-long occupation.][9]

His family was German. Another German student, Laura Matishaw, who was born in 1863, admitted, "I went only a little ways in school. The second reader, I believe, is as far as I went."[10]

Allen Mercer's German mother died and his father could not afford to raise him and his brother, so the boys were placed in an orphanage. Soon they were sent west on an orphan train with 1500 other children. A farmer from Nemaha, Nebraska adopted him and treated him so cruelly that an investigator for the orphanage took him away to another home. "The farmer was supposed to let me get a good education and he made me quit after the eighth grade. He said that too much education is not good for a person."[11]

Margaret Mollner, a German girl born in 1920, explained, "I sure didn't miss much by not going through school. I finished half of the eleventh grade--then didn't want to go anymore. I just didn't have the clothes."[12]

George W. Sprague (b. 1849): "Talk about school days, well mine were very limited. The school I went to was a small log school house . . . There were white oak stakes about two feet long, built into the outside wall. On these stakes there was

9 Ibid. Interview with William R. Cole, 4027 Seward, Omaha
10 Ibid. Interview with Mrs. Laura Matishaw, Bellevue
11 Ibid. Interview with Allen Mercer
12 Ibid. Interview with Margaret Mollner

a two-foot board which served as a desk and bench for us to sit on. . . . About all that was taught in the school at that time was reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling and geography. . . . Quite a few of the children were German and could not talk the American language, but they soon learned."[13]

Peter Christensen (b. 1867), a Danish student, recalls, "My few years of school were fun, but my whole education, perhaps, would hardly cover the third grade in America. I started school at the age of seven and went until I was twelve and a half. I remember my mother had to drive me to school with a switch one day. I could only go in the winter, as I had to care for the cows and sheep from May until November first."[14]

Also Danish, Alice Pedersen (b. 1896) remembers, "Our school had men teachers. They were pretty ornery I can tell you. Children in my childhood community could go to school only in the winter time. They were usually seventeen or eighteen before they got out of grade school."[15]

A Dutch boy, Wesley Cook (b. 1857), attended country school ". . . which was held in a large room of a big house. All the book education I have, I obtained from the country schools . . . Like many I read the old McGuffey Reader but I also read the one before it was published. This was in 1868."[16]

13 Ibid. Interview With George Sprague, 4438 Franklin, Omaha
14 Ibid. Interview With Peter Christensen, 3306 Lafayette, Omaha
15 Ibid. Interview With Alice Pedersen, 2710 Browne St, Omaha
16 Ibid. Interview With Wesley J. Cook, 3109 Reynolds, Omaha

As hinted at earlier, the Greek immigrants, at least those colonizing in Omaha, were somewhat antagonistic towards the educational system available to them. Louie Diamantis said " . . . the Greeks believe that a woman's place is in the home, and that she doesn't need much education."[17] And there is considerable evidence that most Greek girls were allowed only the minimum necessary education, with few attending college until much later. Christ Pappas (b. 1894) elaborated, "Willing to send all my kids to school. Don't like the system. Girls and boys in same school. Bad. You can see it."[18]

A Swedish boy, Carl Peterson (b. 1878), who attended a country school near Colon, remembers that " . . . father used to come to school quite often and tell me to go and get the cattle off the neighbor's land. Sometimes father would at 11 a.m. and by the time I would get the cows home it would be noon and he would tell me, well it's dinner time, now you might as well herd the cows this afternoon, then you can go to school again tomorrow. So it went and the school was a side issue it seemed. The reason the children would be called on to get the cows off of the neighbors' land was this: many times if the parents would go after cattle that were on the neighbors' places, they didn't want to get into an argument with the neighbors, so they would send the children and nothing was said. In all, I went to school three winters and finished the third grade." [19]

17 Ibid. Interview With Louie Diamantis, 4628 S. 26th, Omaha.
18 Ibid. Interview With Christ Pappas, 3927 N. 24th, Omaha
19 Ibid. Interview With Carl H. Peterson

As much of a minority as any ethnic popular the Negroes in Nebraska faired quite well in the educational process. "In only one phase of their life do the Negroes of Nebraska approach equality with all other races, and that is with regard to their educational status. There is only one system of schools in Nebraska for all people, and all students, regardless of race, color, or creed, are admitted impartially."[20]

The report from which the above was drawn noted that there is generally a high level of literacy among Negroes in Nebraska, and that in some cities there were no Negroes who were illiterate.

"The Negro population of America at the close of the Civil War was almost entirely illiterate. Among the ex-slaves who settle in Nebraska during Territorial and early Statehood days there were very few who could read or write . . . Negroes coming to Nebraska, however, were not backward in realizing the advantages of an education, and were quick to grasp the opportunities offered by Nebraska's educational system. As early as 1865 Negroes enrolled in publicschools in Omaha."[21]

Particularly interesting in the history of early ethnic education in Nebraska is the experience of the Danish people. They took great pride in the heritage of their homeland, and these immigrants were often at odds with one another over

20 Works Project Administration. The Negroes in Nebraska, n.d., pp. 33-34.

21 Ibid.

choice of language and retention of national characteristics. Their children, like those of other immigrants, often experienced the same trials in this strange new environment:

> The older ones had gone to school in Massachusetts, and their mother could not forget how they had been treated there on their first day in school. The red shoes Alfred had worn, new ones beautifully made, that she had brought from Denmark, had caused a near riot at school. Although it had been a cold day in March, Alfred had thrown them away and walked home barefooted, because the other children had made so much fun of them.[22]
>
> ---
>
> "Hit him, Jim."
> "Hit the bastard."
> "He's a damn Dane."[23]
>
> ---
>
> "Not one of you can recite a poem?"
> Hans stood up and said, "I can." Then nervous with pride and fear, for the teacher's words had attracted the attention of the whole school, he spoke:
> *Den lille skorstenfejer dreng,*
> *Ma tidlige up fra sin varme seng. . . .*
> Before he could go further the whole room burst into laughter. Confused and ashamed, he sat down. The teacher quieted the room, and then with more gentleness than she had yet shown, told him that he must not talk in a foreign language, that he must recite in English.[24]

To ease the difficulties and to help their children get a thorough education the Danish immigrants supplemented what Nebraska offered by providing vacation school in churches and in Nysted a folk school. The vacation school was a rich experience, allowing the children to sing beautiful Danish songs, hear stories about Danish heroes, and be allowed to read Danish books. The folk schools were designed more for young adults, offering courses in history, literature, science,

---

22 Winther, Sophus Keith. Take All to Nebraska, University of Nebraska Press, 1976, p. 47.
23 Ibid. p. 53.
24 Ibid. pp.54-55.

song and gymnastics. The folk school gave no credits and had no graduation, yet the one example in Nebraska, at Nysted, offered a very respectable assemblage of instructors.[25]

Alfred Nielsen recalls that practically all the children in school were of Danish parentage. "During recess the children spoke Danish and no teacher possessed enough authority to stop it. It was the language of the homes, and most of the children could speak nothing but that when they started school. However, the teachers were patient about the lanauge question. They earned their meager salaries in a Danish community and prudence dictated that they treat their employers with respect."[26]

Nielsen also noted that while the children were attending the Danish church vacation school they were expected to speak Danish, but often exercised their constitutional rights to be Americans and spoke English instead.

"For a thousand years my people had lived among the lakes and hills of Jutland, Denmark. Some of the well-meaning, if misguided, teachers of the vacation school had told us that we owed our first allegiance to Denmark. We did not argue with them. We hardly gave the statement any thought. But lo, something was happing in the deep recesses of our minds. When we children played war on the playgrounds, we were not divided between Danes and Germans. Most of these children had ancestors

25 Nielsen, Alfred C. Life In An American Denmark. Grand View College, 1962, p.28.
26 Ibid. pp. 76-77.

who had fought the Germans. No! We fought the battles of Lexington, Bunker Hill, Gettysburg, and San Juan Hill over again."[27]

Nielsen's experience is an excellent example of the Americanization process which occured in these schools, showing that in spite of uncomfortable acceptness, hardships of many sorts, and the barrier of language, that the pride of wanting to be an American kept the learning process at a high level.

27 Ibid. pp. 83-84.

DEC 1981
ERIC/CRESS
RECEIVED

Nebraska

COUNTRY SCHOOLS TODAY

Prepared by
James Dertien, 1/81

Hie Warren, a pipe-smoking, somewhat older gentleman, has been publicly given notice that his office will be closed soon. He is County Superintendent for Sarpy County, Nebraska, the site of Moses Merril's first mission school in 1835. He has been in office for 18 years and has two years left in his current term.

His current domain is one rural school with one teacher and one student, located just a mile or so from two fast-growing suburban Omaha communities with large, glamorous elementary schools containing hundreds of students.

Douglas Jensen, in his well-tailored suit, classical music coming from an 8-track stereo player on a shelf above his desk, supervises 21 rural school districts in Madison County. And he is busy and excited. Country school business in Madison County is good.

Reorganization began in Sarpy County in the early 60's and by 1965 there were only two or three country schools remaining. Similar efforts reduced in a similar fashion their numbers throughout the state. In some counties where only a handful remain there is not even enough work for a full-time county superintendent. In Cedar County, for instance, the person acting as superintendent peforms the same work for two other counties. She spends one afternoon a week in her office in Hartington, probably the same amount of time in the other counties, and still

holds down a half-time job doing bookkeeping for a public school system.

In some counties numerous rural schools still exist primarily because of distances, and the unwillingness of residents to put their children on buses for extended periods of time. In other instances, because generations of the same families have attended a school there is a matter of pride which keeps the school vibrant and alive.

Douglas Jensen's Madison County schools represent almost an ideal to any country school loyalist. A number of the schools are seeing much enlarged attendance and community interest because of residential trends. Persons from Norfolk, for instance, wishing to live in the country, want to send their children to the nearby rural schools. So considerable growth has occured and will continue to occur in these suburban country schools.

Also, there has been a spinoff from the workforce in the community of Norfolk, the largest city in the county and one with a number small industries. The wives of many workers are their teaching degrees, and a scarcity of teaching positions in the Norfolk gives the Madison County schools access to a large list of teachers who are willing to accept, because it represents a second income, the slightly lower wage scale offered by these rural school districts.

The county superintendent's office in Madison is able to work with the schools in a unified program of supportive services which comes very, very close to matching the level of audiovisual and inservice programs available to urban schools.

Jensen's two room office is filled to capacity with a fantastic assortment of audiovisual equipment delivered on demand by van to any of the schools. Soon he expects to have television sets and videotape playback decks in every classroom (now only 85% have them). The County maintains a contract for audiovisual software services from the local Educational Services Unit, with the ESU providing continual delivery to each school.

In Madison County each school is visited twice a month. The superintendent's office issues a monthly newsletter, provides teacher evaluations, arranges for an insurance program and photos for students, maintains all reporting systems for budgets, membership, etc., and provides advisory assistance to school boards. The superintendent and his secretary also arrange annual interschool activities, including an annual field and track meet, an annual tour day, and an annual spelling contest.

Each month teachers are given inservice training.

During this researcher's visit to the county, teachers were attending a full-day training session on solar applications on farms sponsored by the county extension agency.

Mr. Jensen is an enthusiastic educator. And it appears as though his teachers and especially the parents are enthusiastic about the schools. Parent attendance at school activities and support through P.T.O.'s (parent-teacher organizations) has been excellent.

The range of excellence and success in other counties surveyed reaches a variety of levels anywhere in between Madison County and Sarpy County.

One person interviewed in this project, Alton Larsen, of Blair, Nebraska, though somewhat hesitant to say it, felt that the role of country schools is past. He was quite critical, not of the nature of the school, but of the administrative decisions that had led to their demise. The schools should have, in his opinion, consolidated into larger rural schools, rather than reorganizing with the city schools. In this way they could have retained many of the strengths the rural school offers and still afford to survive in a highly competitive educational world.

(I was unable to pull together any additional unique material which would have proven useful to the project on the status of current schools.)